

# **From Training to Learning: Developing Student Employees Through Experiential Learning Design**

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## **Abstract**

In this chapter, the authors argue for moving student employee training programs beyond a sole focus on training students for effective service, to training based on experiential learning (EL) principles. The authors describe the development of an experiential approach for two student positions in the Ohio University Libraries' social media and video production work. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the challenges in this approach, and addresses issues of scaling the model to larger student employment programs.

## **Keywords**

Student employee training programs, workplace learning, outreach, communication, social media, video production, library marketing, student engagement, instructional design, high impact practice

Learning in libraries: the phrase may conjure up images of students working with a librarian to find information or poring over library materials as they write a paper. When we consider learning in the library, however, we should also call to mind a sometimes-overlooked group: student employees. At many libraries, students work across departments and help with a wide range of vital tasks, both behind the scenes and in the public eye. The library literature offers much advice for training student employees with the goal of providing effective service within the library. Less often is there guidance for framing student employment as a learning opportunity that fits into the student's overall academic experience. Regardless of the type of work assignment, we think student employment is an opportunity for libraries to go beyond training and explicitly encourage student learning.

In this chapter, we describe an effort to take an explicit experiential learning approach for students working in our library's outreach program. While the students in these roles had previously been actively engaged in the library's social media and educational video production,

their positions lacked an intentional focus on student learning. By framing their work as a learning experience, the student employees were able to set their own learning goals and use their work as a means of meeting those goals.

### **Student Employees in Libraries: An Emphasis on Training**

The library literature is replete with articles describing strategies for working effectively with student employees. Their work has become increasingly vital to many academic libraries, as the number of full-time staff members has decreased in the wake of budget cuts and positions left unfilled after retirements (Manley & Holey, 2014, pp. 76-77). With their growing importance to the daily work of academic libraries, many librarians have described their approach to recruiting, training, motivating, and retaining student employees for effective library services (see Farr & Valentine, 2011 and McInnes, 2009, for examples of entire outlines of the hiring, training, and the student employee retention process).

Many writers have offered up examples of their own training programs for students working in a range of roles. For example, Guerrero and Corey (2003, pp. 99-100) described a card-sorting exercise to help students learn to correctly shelve books. Drewitz (2013) advocated for a mentoring approach and modeling expected customer service behavior when training students for public-facing work. Hillyard and Whitson (2008) recounted the development of a collaborative training program for students who worked in variety of academic services units. The new training program brought students together for an interactive session where they were introduced to the many academic services units, discussed customer services scenarios and public safety issues, and provided feedback on the overall training process to develop future training offerings. Starkel (2014) described a training program for students working in Butler University's Information Commons. Starkel and colleagues deployed the University's Learning Management System for training, which helped the students progress from basic training in library services to more advanced skills they would need to address research-related questions.

Articles such as these provide insight into the student training processes for student employees. Any student employee who comes to the library will indeed need to receive training in order to do their work. If we leave the conversation at training, however, we fail to consider the student employee as a learner who gains more from their work experience than income and a

line on their resume. If we think of the student employee as a learner, we can go beyond training and help the students to develop skills that transfer to life beyond the library.

### **A Learning-Focused Approach**

Some libraries have intentionally incorporated learning opportunities into their student training programs. Thomsett-Scott (2012) developed a program of training and mentoring for LIS graduate students working in library reference services. Students in this program received hands-on training that Thomsett-Scott identified as a form of experiential learning. Participants were provided with training in areas of personal interest and need. For example, after realizing a need for public speaking skills training among the graduate students, library staff offered opportunities for students to develop a public presentation. Similarly, Evanson (2015) described a peer research advisor program at Davidson University, having decided to “focus on the students as learners, not just employees” to help with motivation (p. 30). The training program for peer advisors included learning outcomes tied to information literacy threshold concepts. Each student worked with a mentor and developed their own long-term project that both supported the work of the university and served as a project they could reference in their post-graduation job search.

York et al. (2010) have discussed the incorporation of experiential learning into library services at Middle Tennessee State University. They note that most examples of EL programs in libraries consist of marketing or advertising classes creating library promotional material for a class project. The authors recount several collaborative examples at MTSU, including a partnership with an art class to develop thought-provoking artwork intended to reduce paper consumption in the library (p. 195). These projects provided students the opportunity to engage in EL in the library with projects that helped the library meet its own goals. Such projects, however, came out of coursework, rather than student employment in the library.

Markgraf (2015) has described an effort at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Libraries to turn student employment into a “high impact practice” (p. 770) through which students gain skills and experience in areas related to their academic work. Library supervisors at UW-Eau Claire drew on the IOWA GROW (Guided Reflection On Work) program from the University of Iowa to help students draw connections between their work and academic lives through a series of reflection questions (Office of the Vice President for Student Life, 2015).

While UW-Eau Claire's program does not explicitly incorporate elements of EL, the program does include a focus on reflection, to help students make sense of how their work experiences "fit" into their overall academic career.

From these examples, we can see that some libraries' student employee programs treat the student worker as both a learner and an employee. One way that libraries can enhance student workers' experiences is to encourage them to reflect on their work and to consider how it fits into their academic life in college.

## **Current Student Employment Practices at the Ohio University Libraries**

At the Ohio University Libraries, we employ several students who produce social media and video content to support the Libraries' marketing and outreach efforts. Some of the students who do this work are funded through a special university-sponsored program that encourages significant work experience and career exploration opportunities for students. We have employed a Social Media Content Developer through this program since 2011 and a Multimedia Production Specialist since 2014.

The Social Media Content Developer works with Jessica Hagman, the Libraries' Social Media Coordinator, to create the Libraries' social media content. The student position was envisioned as a way to help the library develop additional content for its social networks, at a time when such work was not part of any full-time staff member's assigned work. In recent years, social media communication has become increasingly important for a wide variety of fields in which students might work after graduation, making the Social Media Content Developer position a valuable opportunity to learn how to translate an organization's communication into social content.

Similarly, the Multimedia Production Specialist works with the eLearning Librarian to create library promotional videos, as well as educational and other multimedia to promote specific information literacy outcomes. Ohio University librarians have created short videos for a number of years, which are used in classes and embedded in the FAQ section of the Libraries' website. We have found it increasingly time consuming to keep existing videos updated and to create new ones that have a high production quality and meet accessibility standards (such as closed captioning). We hired a Multimedia Production Specialist student who has knowledge of

video production and editing, and who can lend a fresh, student-centered perspective to our video content.

While these student positions contributed greatly to the Libraries' overall social media and video outreach strategies, their training was much like what other librarians have described in the literature: heavily focused on training, and highly directed by the student's supervisor. In the Fall of 2015, however, we sought to re-conceive the positions in terms of student learning and to intentionally incorporate EL for the two students assigned to this work for the new school year.

## **Adapting Student Employment Practices to Incorporate Experiential Learning**

### **Instructional Design Principles for Experiential Learning**

In considering how to incorporate experiential elements formally into our student employment practices, we found it useful to apply the instructional design principles described by Lindsey and Berger (2009). Drawing on John Dewey, David Kolb, and other educational theorists, Lindsey and Berger provide a set of guidelines for educators and instructional designers to implement EL in an instructional context.

Their first design principle is "*framing the experience*" (Lindsey and Berger, 2009, p. 125). Just because a student is engaging in an activity does not mean this is automatically experiential learning. In order for it to become so, certain objectives and relationships should be discussed at the beginning in order to set the tone and help students engage more intentionally with the experience. Elements involved at this stage include communicating learning goals and establishing criteria for authentically assessing the experience. A list of learning goals for the Social Media Content Developer and Multimedia Production Specialist positions is shown in Text Box 11.1.

[Insert Box 11.1 here]

[Caption: Learning Goals for the Social Media Content Developer and Multimedia Production Specialist positions]

It is also important to discuss the social structure and types of interactions expected between learners, and between learner and teacher (Lindsey and Berger, 2009, pp.125-6). We believe this latter element is particularly important to consider when the experiential learning happens in a student employment context, where the teacher is also the work supervisor. Experiential learning "involves a shift in the power base between instructor and learners such that the learners assume more of the responsibilities for what is learned and how learning occurs" (Lee and Caffarella, 1994, p. 44). In order for this shift to occur, it is vital that the learner sees the teacher as someone who can be challenged (Lindsey and Berger, 2009, p. 129). As tricky as it is to establish this level of trust between learner and teacher in a normal classroom, it can be even more difficult when the learner/teacher relationship is also an employee/supervisor relationship. This is especially the case when learning is taking place in a work environment where there are pre-established practices and procedures, challenges to which might meet with some resistance. Thus, we believe it is important that supervisors work hard to cultivate an environment of safety and respect, where the student employee feels comfortable voicing what might be seen as challenges to their supervisor or existing practices of the organization. This is not something that can be established just at the outset; rather, the supervisor must be conscious in maintaining it throughout the experience.

At the same time, there are situations where some didactic instruction during the initial framing stage of experiential learning are appropriate. This may be especially true where there are ethical or legal issues involved (Lindsey and Berger, 2009, p. 132). In our case, for example, our student employees are creating public, digital outreach and instruction materials that must adhere to certain legal guidelines, such as accessibility and copyright. This is something that needs to be communicated to the student at the beginning of their training, because there can be real-world, detrimental consequences for everyone involved if the guidelines are ignored. Even in this situation, however, we think it is important not just to tell students they must follow the rules "because we say so," but to help them make sense of the guidelines by helping them relate them to their own prior knowledge and experiences.

Lindsey and Berger's next design principle is "*activating experience*" (p. 126). This is the "meat" of the experience itself, and as such there is less for the supervisor to do here to actively direct the process. Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics of the experience that the supervisor should help facilitate. For one, the experience should be as authentic as possible, so

that the decisions the student employee makes and actions they perform provide them with realistic feedback. The Social Media Content Developer, for example, receives regular feedback from the library's social media followers as their engagement - or lack thereof - indicates whether the content has been valuable to its intended audience.

Rather than giving the student employee directions for specific tasks to carry out, it is better to take a problem-oriented approach, with the student employee given an issue or scenario to analyze and resolve. Frequently, the Multimedia Production Specialist is given a topic for a video and perhaps a loose outline, but it is up to them to decide how to best design the video. In addition to working with the eLearning Librarian, they develop videos that are commissioned by other librarians for use in their classes and events, collaborating with the librarian to turn their vision into a final product. This collaboration is part of the learning experience in itself, since people working in video production are often commissioned to work on projects and must learn how to effectively balance the desires of the client with constraints set by time and resources.

By approaching the learning opportunity as a situation to be analyzed and figured out rather than a set of predetermined tasks to be completed, students have the opportunity to receive authentic feedback for decisions they make based on their failures and successes, and to incorporate this information into their knowledge base. Since “individuals do not simply absorb knowledge in authentic learning experiences,” but rather “utilize their prior knowledge in the interpretation, retention, and revision of incoming, new information,” learners should be encouraged to draw on their previously-acquired skills and knowledge in solving the problems they are presented with in the learning context, thus creating new knowledge from the experience (Jackson and MacIsaac, 1994, p. 22). Most students who have come into the Social Media Content Developer position have taken classes in social media use or have used social media marketing for a student organization. Communicating on behalf of the library, however, requires that they use this experience as a basis for learning how to speak on behalf of an official university-sponsored account that has a specific voice it needs to maintain. They must also learn to build social content around a wide range of library-related topics and services. At the start of the school year, this requires extensive support from their supervisor to ensure that they have sufficient information to do their work. Throughout the academic year, however, they grow to know more about the library and eventually are able to develop content independently.

Finally, it is important to help create a learning experience with the right level of difficulty for the student employee. The experience should present enough challenges that the student employee is stretched to develop their skills and knowledge, but shouldn't be so difficult that they are likely to fail. For example, in creating videos about specialized resources that the Multimedia Production students may not be familiar with, the librarian tends to be more directly involved in developing the video and writing the script, so that the student can focus on the technical and design aspects.

The final design element we strive for is "*reflecting on experience*" (Lindsey and Berger, 2009, p. 128). This means that student employees are asking themselves the questions, "What happened? Why did it happen? What have I learned from this? Would I do something differently in the future?" In the fast-paced work environment of a library's outreach and social media area, moving from one project to another in quick succession is commonplace. Thus, it is important to incorporate reflection into the students' experiential learning process, so that they have the opportunity to step back and consider what they have learned, helping to build their knowledge into the future.

One method for reflection, particularly when there are multiple students, is to have a group discussion or "debriefing" after an activity (Lindsey and Berger, 2009, p. 128). In our environment, where there are one or two student employees working independently, the supervisor might not always be physically present when the student finishes a project; thus, a verbal debriefing is supplemented by written reflection. Having the student employee write in a journal or blog gives them opportunities for reflection throughout the experience, and gives the supervisor the chance both to assess the project as it occurs and to ask the student employee additional questions to spur on more reflection. We have found that the use of a project management system can help to facilitate student work and reflection on their performance. We have used the free tool Trello for tracking student work for several years, and have seen that it enables efficient communication between the supervisor and student working at different times. When we decided to incorporate experiential learning into students' work more explicitly, we developed a "project" for each student, in which they were able to track their progress towards individualized learning goals. Alternately, the student could keep a journal on a shared platform like Google Drive, which lets them track and reflect on their learning experience in collaboration with their supervisor.



An additional method for reflection we are implementing this year is a reflective portfolio. In addition to having student employees highlight the best representations of their learning and work, this portfolio will feature reflections written by the student about what they learned from the experience. MacIsaac and Jackson write, “Constructing reflective portfolios moves the learner beyond a description of the portfolio contents to an examination of the learning documented in the portfolio through a discussion of what the portfolio reveals about the learner’s level of accomplishment” (1994, p. 66). Reflective portfolios thus give student employees a chance to reflect back on their entire experience over the year, and give the supervisor the opportunity for summative assessment. It also provides the student employee with a tangible representation of their work to show potential employers, and the experience of presenting their work in a professional way.

## **Challenges and Issues to Consider**

### **Allowing for Failure**

Working with students to develop library outreach materials poses a challenge, given that EL encourages students to have the opportunity to fail. The students’ work in this case may be public and reflect poorly on the library’s public image, if not done well. This is not only an issue faced by students working in outreach positions, however. Many student employees perform their work in the public eye and with patrons who may not differentiate between student employees and full-time staff. Supervisors must balance students’ need to grow through their learning experiences with the library’s need to maintain a consistent, appropriate, and accurate public presence.

We’ve approached the issue of failure for outreach student work by asking the students to draft their content for approval before it appears publicly on the library’s social media accounts. Drafts are posted on a Google Drive spreadsheet that serves as an editorial calendar. Drafting content ahead of publication allows the librarian to ensure that the content is accurate and is consistent with the library’s established social media tone and content guidelines. Any problems can be addressed in a way that lets the student make their own changes and learn from the experience.

A recent example: a student who sought to inject a bit of levity into the library’s Twitter content proposed a message that included a meme photo. This widely shared image features an

unflattering photo of a young woman who, presumably, did not intend to become the subject of many online jokes. While it is not officially part of our policy to not use memes featuring ordinary people, such images can be interpreted as bullying behavior (Franklin, 2015) and fall outside of the friendly tone we seek to exude via our social media communication. Having discussed this concern with their supervisor, the student was able to find a meme image that did not include an ordinary person who unwittingly became the subject of an unkind meme.

In terms of library communication, failure may also include messages that simply do not resonate with their intended audience, or that fail to engage followers on the social networking site. To address this element, we have incorporated more regular reviews of our social media content to determine what types of messages lead to higher levels of engagement and to help us develop future messages. Similarly, we have started to track number of views for videos, comparing views on YouTube with views when videos are posted directly to Facebook. While we have always kept an eye on analytics, the process has not been intentional. By regularly reviewing our content and the available data for message effectiveness, students receive valuable feedback about their work. We are also seeking to expand our assessment to include instructional goals for library video content. To this end, we have begun assessing the effectiveness of videos created for a specific class or assignment, by seeking feedback directly from students, faculty, and subject librarians.

### **Scaling Up**

We would be remiss to leave out issues of scale. The two authors directly supervise a single student each during the academic year, while many other libraries are working with a larger group of students performing a broad range of tasks. Incorporating EL training in a larger cohort of student employees will inherently be less efficient than traditional training practices (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010). A library employing a fleet of students who shelve books or answer questions at library service points, for example, will have to devote significant resources to incorporate EL into the students' training.

### **Allowing Time for Reflection**

Part of the challenge in scaling up the EL approach is to allow time for students to reflect upon their work, and for supervisors to engage directly with employees in the process. The library may need to budget for additional student hourly time and funding for students to reflect on their work, while supervisors will need to budget their own time as well. Students could be

asked to keep a journal or portfolio that their supervisor can view, or employees could engage in a peer reflection process with their fellow student workers.

### **Higher Expectations for Student Workers**

Deploying this type of approach means that the library will be asking more of the student employee than just doing their work. Depending on the individual student and the culture of the library, incorporating EL may be a change from previous practices. Deciding to move in this direction means that supervisors need to communicate new expectations and why they matter. Previously hired students will likely need some time to adapt to the new approach. In our experience with the EL approach, the potential for student learning and productive work is sizable, and worth the investment.

### **Deciding to Invest in Experiential Learning**

None of these issues are trivial. Going “from training to learning” will require the commitment of library resources, including one of the most precious: staff time. Any library considering an experiential training program will have to recognize that this is an investment of scarce resources. We would argue, however, that high quality student employment is worth the investment, for those libraries interested in making it more than just a work experience for students.

In describing the changes made at the UW-Eau Claire, Markgraf (2015) noted that student employment in the library became a “high impact practice” (p. 770). This framing allowed UW-Eau Claire librarians to point to the library as a place where students not only find information, but have the opportunity to gain valuable work and learning experiences. Student employees at Eau Claire’s libraries reflect on how that work influences their development throughout their college experiences. This has become increasingly important in a state where colleges and universities are often under attack for not preparing students for the workforce (Markgraf, 2015). For the students working in the library’s social media and video development, we’ve decided that this approach is worthwhile. While they are earning money and learning job skills, the students also have the opportunity to learn an approach to problem-solving that will serve them well beyond their college years.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Our goal in writing this chapter has been to try to expand the concept of “learning in libraries” beyond what happens at the reference desk, in the library classroom, or in informal

study spaces, to the learning that takes place in student employee positions. Specifically, we believe the experiential learning model offers libraries the chance to provide students with the opportunity to not only gain workplace experience, but to set and achieve authentic learning goals which complement their academic experiences. Taking this approach helps students develop learning strategies that they can apply throughout their post-collegiate lives and careers. A student who has worked in an environment that embraces EL has a model for personal growth and development as well.

In the end, libraries can help students come away with concrete job skills as well as a way to make their work more meaningful in the long term. From this perspective, student employment programs do more than help the library accomplish its work; they become a value-added service that contributes to the overall institutional mission. In outlining this model of library student employment, and how we've put it into practice in our own library, we hope to inspire other libraries to shift their emphasis from training to learning, by incorporating experiential learning design into their student employment program.

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